

MACOMB COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

MENINGITIS INFORMATION SHEET

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the membranes which cover a person's brain and spinal cord. People sometimes refer to it as spinal meningitis. Meningitis is usually caused by a viral or bacterial infection. Knowing whether meningitis is caused by a virus or bacterium is important because the severity of illness and the treatment differ. Viral meningitis is generally less severe and resolves without specific treatment, while bacterial meningitis can be quite severe and may result in brain damage, hearing loss, or learning disability. For bacterial meningitis, it is also important to know which type of bacteria is causing the meningitis because antibiotics can prevent some types from spreading and infecting other people. Before the 1990s, Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) was the leading cause of bacterial meningitis, but new vaccines being given to all children as part of their routine immunizations have reduced the occurrence of meningitis due to H. influenzae. Today, Streptococcus pneumoniae and Neisseria meningitidis are the leading causes of bacterial meningitis.

What are the signs and symptoms of meningitis?

High fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningitis. These symptoms can develop over several hours, or they may take 1-2 days. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion, sleepiness, and seizures.

How is meningitis diagnosed?

Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. If symptoms occur, a person should see a doctor immediately. The diagnosis is usually made by examining a sample of spinal fluid. The spinal fluid is obtained by performing a spinal tap, in which a needle is inserted into an area in the lower back where fluid in the spinal canal is readily accessible.

Can meningitis be treated?

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. It is important, however, that treatment be started early in the course of the disease. Viral meningitis requires no specific treatment and resolves on its own.

Is meningitis contagious?

Yes, some forms of bacterial and viral meningitis are contagious. Bacteria that cause meningitis are spread through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions (i.e., coughing, kissing). Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as things like the common cold or the flu, and they are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been. Some viruses that cause meningitis can also spread from person to person. Fortunately most persons exposed to these viruses experience mild or no symptoms and few actually develop meningitis.

Are there vaccines against meningitis?

Yes, children less than 5 years of age should be vaccinated against Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib). A vaccine has recently become available for the vaccination of children less than 2 years of age against meningitis caused by Streptococcus pneumoniae. A vaccine is also available to help prevent meningitis caused by certain types of Neisseria meningitidis. It is recommended for persons with certain immune system problems and persons traveling to countries where epidemics are occurring. College students, especially freshman living in dormitories, may want to receive the vaccine to decrease their chances of getting meningococcal meningitis.